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INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE  
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE  
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0814  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 4360  
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 7905  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 5466  
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 1314  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1254  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000025

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DEPT. FOR P,EAP/MLS, DRL, AND IO  
PACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/06/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: BURMESE EVERYWHERE DESIRE CHANGE

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Classified By: CDA Shari Villarosa for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

11. (C) Summary: Charge met with six NLD activists in the town of Thaungdwingyi in Magwe Division on January 7. Living very simply and subject to constant harassment by the police, years of repression have not extinguished the spirit of these activists. They meet regularly to talk about their desire to live in a democratic and free society; and they wait for change. These individuals living in a remote, rural town show that the desire for change in Burma is not just an urban phenomenon, but is widespread, since everyone everywhere lives under virtual military occupation.

Who is NLD in Thaungdwingyi?  
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12. (C) The NLD members Charge met appeared to be a representative mix for a town that of 200,000, primarily agricultural-based with a small merchant sector. The leader is retired high school English teacher, partially paralyzed after a three-year stint in prison. The others were a farmer, a teashop owner, a businesswoman, another woman who has studied at the American Center in Rangoon, and the son of the retired teacher. They gather together regularly talk about current issues and books, and meet once a month as a party. Their tastes appear quite cosmopolitan according to the topics and authors they cited to Charge. They discussed corruption in Nigeria, Darfur, Zimbabwe, the Killing Fields of Cambodia. One cited Steinbeck, Twain, Sartre, Camus and Kishore (Mahbubani) as his favorite authors. Much of their knowledge of these topics and authors might have come from listening to the four shortwave radio broadcasters, which they said was their main source of news. Asked if they saw any of DVB's television broadcasts, one pointed to the unlit bulb on the ceiling and asked how could they without electricity. Closer to home they worry about the deteriorating state of education, saying most people cannot afford the 200 kyat per day (roughly 15 cents) to send their children to school. They said the hospitals lack doctors and nurses.

## Military Not Popular Around Town

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¶3. (C) During the 1990 election, NLD won one of the two seats contested in Thaungdwingyi. The activists expected to do better if free elections are scheduled in the future because of growing popular resentment of the military. The military had electricity around the clock, while most of the citizens of the town only receive a couple of hours a day. One activist described it literally as "keeping people in the dark ages." The military had confiscated 13 plots of land circling the city from local farmers to pass to a private company linked to Vice Senior General Maung Aye. The activists described the local economy as "going down into hell." Transportation is primarily by bicycle, along with numerous horse buggies.

¶4. (C) We noted many more military camps than normal in other parts of the country as we drove west from Nay Pyi Taw and then south. Magwe Division in the middle of Central Burma's dry zone is the poorest of the ethnic Burman areas and has traditionally been a hotbed of resistance against authorities. In the past the Burmese Communist Party was very active in this region, hence the many military camps. Given the absence of any current insurgencies in the region, the heavy military presence appears now to serve more as a permanent occupying force.

## September Demonstrations

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¶5. (C) The monks marched in Thaungdwingyi, as they did throughout Burma, for three days, joined by many citizens of the town. Unlike Rangoon, the authorities did not use violence to stop the demonstrations. According to the activists, after three days the Chief Abbot ordered the monks to stop marching. Around ten private citizens were arrested,

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including two of the activists Charge met, and four remain in prison.

## Special Branch is Watching

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¶6. (C) Shortly after the activists described their regular questioning by the Special Branch of the Police, a Special Branch officer accompanied by a Police Lieutenant showed up to question Charge briefly while she was meeting with the activists. They arrived on one of the few motorscooters we observed in the town. Charge asked for the same information the police requested from her (father's name, permanent residence, and local address), which took them aback, but which they provided. They then questioned Charge's driver, who drives Charge full-time in Rangoon. The driver told the police that he did not know who the Charge was, and that he was just told to take her wherever she wanted to go. After 10 minutes the two police left, prompting the activists to call the Special Branch officer "very dirty." They expected they would be questioned again about their conversation with Charge, which continued for another hour.

¶7. (C) Comment: The Special Branch officer clearly intended to intimidate us, although he failed to do so. The Burmese have become used to the harassment, so they will not forego opportunities to get their stories out. The incident revealed how closely people are watched, even in small towns off the main roads. On a more hopeful note, these six activists demonstrated how unsuccessful the military has been at subduing the spirit of the people. Even though they have nothing, they remain defiant in the face of petty harassment. This does not mean that a mass revolt is about to break out, but does indicate the seething discontent in Burma everywhere just below the placid surface.

VILLAROSA